

## The Spirit Himself Intercedes

Romans 8:18–28<sup>1</sup>

### Christians Need to Pray.

Before I go on, I just want to highlight the fact that Christians—all Christians, not just those with some special gift of intercession—all Christians **need** to pray. Lord's Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism assumes this when it asks the question, "Why do Christians need to pray?" and then goes on to tell us that Christians need to pray, because (among other things),

...prayer is **the most important part** of the thankfulness God requires of us.<sup>2</sup>

If you prefer biblical proof to confessional, in Luke 18, Jesus told His disciples a parable to the effect that they "ought always to pray and not lose heart,"<sup>3</sup> and in 1 Thessalonians 5, the Apostle Paul wrote,

<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 ESV</sup>

So, there's that. All Christians need to pray, and we need to pray

<sup>18</sup> ...at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. <sup>Ephesians 6:18 ESV</sup>

Keeping alert

...with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints... <sup>Ephesians 6:18 ESV</sup>

A Christian who does not pray is like a human who does not breathe. The latter is in a condition we would describe as death, and spiritually, so is the former. Even so, nothing in this text, and nothing that I say should be taken as grounds for prayerlessness, or even a feeling of discouragement in prayer. That's not the point. Don't take it that way.

Besides, we've already seen in verses 18 – 25 of our text this morning that there are plenty of reasons why Christians need to pray. In verse 18 Paul said,

<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>Romans 8:18 ESV</sup>

Hopefully, we all believe this to be true, but, if you think about it, for this to be true, there inevitably have to be sufferings, and we know this both from experience, and, more importantly, from the word of God itself. It is written large in the pages of scripture and in the lives of God's people. Suffering is real, and suffering will come, and James, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote,

<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray... <sup>James 5:13 ESV</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> CRCNA (Christian Reformed Church in North America), ed., "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 116", *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 68, emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Luke 18:1–8.

So, again, there you go. And this is especially important when we recognize that this inevitable suffering has a point, and the point is the glory that is to be revealed to us and in us. Our suffering is not pointless, or arbitrary;

...**all things**, in fact, come to us not by chance but from [God's] fatherly hand...<sup>4</sup>

(but more about that in the evening service when we look at Lord's Day 10). This is because all things—**all** things—are on a particular trajectory. All things are being worked out according to the will of God. Verses 19 and 20 tell us that even the physical universe,

<sup>19</sup> ...**the creation** waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it... Romans 8:19–20 ESV

that is, according to the will of God. And this,

...in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption **and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.** Romans 8:20–21 ESV

So, the end—the destiny—of the creation itself—the universe—is linked to the destiny of the children of God. When the people of God are fully revealed, then the creation will be set free from the natural corruption that has existed in this world since the fall of man into sin. And in the meantime,

<sup>22</sup> ...we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit... Romans 8:22–23 ESV

we who belong to Christ by grace through faith—we who have the Spirit of Christ dwelling within us<sup>5</sup>—

...groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Romans 8:23–25 ESV

And how do we do this? How do we wait with patience for that for which we hope? Well, we groan inwardly, but outwardly, we pray. Outwardly, we stay in constant communion with the God. We stay connected to

God, the great Creator of all things...

who,

...doth uphold, direct dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His

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<sup>4</sup> CRCNA, ed., "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 27", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 23, emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Romans 8:9.

infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.<sup>6</sup>

which would seem to indicate that this God—our God; the God who has revealed Himself in Holy Scripture—is a God that we can trust to work things out not only at the end, but in real time too, and of course, He is.

### The Spirit of Life.

We'll see this very specifically in a few minutes, but as we move on, notice how Paul connected all of this together. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

The central and continuing theme of this 8th chapter is...a continuing exposition of the theme announced in verse 1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."; **there is none now, and there never will be.** The whole object of the chapter is to show that our final glorification is absolutely guaranteed from the moment of our justification...<sup>7</sup>

The connecting factor in all of this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1 ESV

And why?

<sup>2</sup> For the law **of the Spirit of life** has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:2 ESV

In the light of this, we are to "walk in the Spirit" (verse 4), "live according to the Spirit" (verse 5), "set our minds on the things of the Spirit" (also verse 5), "put to death the misdeeds of the body...by the Spirit" (verse 13), and being "led by the Spirit" (verse 14). And according to Romans 8, this reality for all who are in Christ, because the Spirit of God dwells in us now as a kind of firstfruits (verse 23), and further He will one day—at the resurrection of the dead—give life to our mortal bodies as He has given life to us spiritually. He proves this, according to verses 16 and 17, by bearing

<sup>16</sup> ...witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8:16–17 ESV

Which brings us back to our text, because this is why verse 26 begins with the word "Likewise".

<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness... Romans 8:26 ESV

In the same way as the Spirit has done all of these other things, He also helps us in our weakness. And a couple of things here. The weakness is assumed, and it is constant. This

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<sup>6</sup> R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (2015 Edition) (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2436.

<sup>7</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans (Volume 8): The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 121, emphasis mine.

is not saying that the Spirit will help us in our moments of weakness (as few and far between as they may be). Not at all.

By ourselves we are too weak to hold our own even for a moment.<sup>8</sup>

So, as the Catechism says, we need the Lord to

...uphold us and make us strong **with the strength of [His] Holy Spirit**, so that we may not go down to defeat in this spiritual struggle.<sup>9</sup>

### In All Our Weaknesses.

Also note, that the Spirit does not help us only when asked. The Spirit helps us in all our weakness, which means, the Spirit helps us all the time. This is important, because verse 26 goes on to say,

<sup>26</sup> ...For we do not know what to pray for as we ought... Romans 8:26 ESV

which is certainly saying that even when we perceive the weakness in ourselves, because of that very weakness, we don't know how or what to pray about it, at least not as we ought. As one commentator has written,

Perplexity as to how to pray for oneself is a universal Christian experience.<sup>10</sup>

Even the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, experienced this. In 2 Corinthians 12, he spoke of some adversity—"a thorn"; "a messenger of Satan"—and he specifically said that this was given to keep him from becoming proud in light of the revelation that had been given to him. Some have speculated that it came in the form of physical illness; others, that it was demonic in nature; still others that it was a physical illness that was demonic in nature.

The truth is, we don't know exactly what the presenting issue was, but Paul was suffering with it, so he prayed and he asked God to let it leave him (which is an interesting way of putting it). It was not a declaration. He did not command whatever it was to be gone in the name of Jesus. He simply asked the Lord to let it leave him. That was Paul's prayer request. That is what he wanted. He went to the Lord and said, "God, here is this thorn—here is this adversity—that is afflicting me. Please, take it away."

See, Paul thought he knew how he ought to pray in this circumstance and he took it to the Lord on three separate occasions (and it's probably safe to assume that it was three occasions of extended prayer and fasting, although we cannot say for sure). Regardless, whatever sort of prayer it was, God's answer was just "No."

<sup>9</sup> ...[H]e said to me... 2 Corinthians 12:9 ESV

Paul wrote,

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<sup>8</sup> CRCNA, ed., "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 127", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 76.

<sup>9</sup> CRCNA, ed., "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 127", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 76, emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup> R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible*, 1993, cf. 2 Cor. 12:8–10; Phil. 1:22–24.

...“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12:9  
ESV

In other words, “You want me to take this away, Paul, but I won’t. First of all, if I did, you’d be consumed with pride and you’d be useless. Besides, you have all that you need. My grace *is sufficient* for this trial. My strength *is made perfect* in your weakness.” And Paul’s response? More trying to manipulate God with more words and increasingly louder declarations? No. Absolutely not. He tells us himself in 2 Corinthians 9, verses 9 and 10.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 ESV

### According to the Will of God.

See? In our weakness, we don’t know how to pray as we ought—not even the Apostle Paul—but that’s OK, because

...the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. Romans 8:26 ESV

By the way, the Spirit was doing this for Paul too. When Paul asked God to let the thorn, whatever it was, leave him, the Spirit was interceding for him then too. His groans, those times when Paul couldn’t even clearly articulate exactly what it was that he wanted, were raised up before the Lord by the Holy Spirit, and Paul received his answer.

...“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12:9  
ESV

Because a “no”, or a “not now/not yet”, doesn’t mean that a prayer remains unanswered. We have this tendency to think that it does. We tend to think that God has only answered our prayers when we get what we want. We even withhold thanks sometimes when what we wanted to happen hasn’t happened. For example, when was the last time you thanked God for answered prayer when the person you were praying for did not receive a miraculous healing? But God still says,

...“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” 2 Corinthians 12:9 ESV

This *is* an answer to our prayer, and not only should we be ready to give thanks for it, we should be ready even to boast in our weakness, knowing that when we are weak, that’s when the power of Christ really shines through. Because we almost always ask for what we want, and maybe we even think that we need what we want, but the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness by interceding

<sup>27</sup> ...for the saints **according to the will of God.** Romans 8:27 ESV

And what was it John said? 1 John 5, verse 14:

<sup>14</sup> And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything **according to his will** *he hears us*. <sup>1 John 5:14 ESV</sup>

We know that when we ask for that which is *according to His will*, God hears, and grants what has been asked. James put it the other way, though. He said,

<sup>3</sup> When you ask, **you do not receive**, because you ask with wrong motives, *that you may spend what you get on your pleasures*. <sup>James 4:3 NIV8411</sup>

But,

<sup>27</sup> ...the Spirit intercedes... <sup>Romans 8:27 ESV</sup>

and He *always* intercedes,

...for the saints **according to the will of God**. <sup>Romans 8:27 ESV</sup>

Therefore, we may conclude that God always hears His Spirit, and since the intercession of His Spirit is always in accordance with His will, God always grants what the Spirit asks. And even though that means we don't always get what we want—the thorn isn't always allowed to go—this is a good thing, because God's will alone is good.<sup>12</sup>

This is why we are taught to confess:

He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head **without the will of my Father in heaven**: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.<sup>13</sup>

Don't be discouraged, then, by the idea that we don't know how to pray as we ought. Rather, pray all the more.

<sup>2</sup> Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. <sup>Colossians 4:2 ESV</sup>

Then, rest in the reality that

<sup>26</sup> ...we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. <sup>Romans 8:26 ESV</sup>

and the Spirit always

...intercedes for the saints **according to the will of God**. <sup>Romans 8:27 ESV</sup>

Even so,

<sup>28</sup> And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. <sup>Romans 8:28 NASB14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. CRCNA, ed., "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 124", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 73.

<sup>13</sup> CRCNA, ed., "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1", *Ecumenical Creeds*, 13, emphasis mine.

<sup>14</sup> *New American Standard Bible, electronic edition*. (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1986), Ro 8:28.